DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 388 975 CS 215 107

AUTHOR Grubbs, Katherine K.
TITLE Reading Community: Writing Difference.
PUB DATE Jul 95
NOTE 10p.; Paper presented at the Annual Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition (14th, University Park, PA, July 12-15, 1995).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Higher Education; Individualism; *Self Concept; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction; *Writing Teachers
IDENTIFIERS *Community Identity; Composition Theory; *Conference on Coll Composition and Communication; Secular Humanism; Social Constructivism

ABSTRACT

Reading the speeches each year of the program chair of the Conference on College Composition and Communication gives the reader a concrete notion of how the field has been perceived and constructed by these leaders in composition. The more recent articles also construct a surprisingly unified and stable identity for the field which is premised on both a liberal humanist subject and a belief in communitarianism. All of these authors are positing a unity at some cost, however, a unity that bleeds out difference in theory, in practice, and in process. In an effort throughout the past decade to move away from notions of individualism and the individual writer, these writers have moved decisively to perpetuate a belief in the power of community. Difference is then lost in the name of pluralism and community. As Lester Faigley and Iris Young suggest, moving from the relativistic rhetoric of individualism to an argument for communities does not represent any progress away from the modernist belief in liberal humanism. Faigley writes that "like the concept of the autonomous subject that denies difference among people by positing an underlying rational unity for every individual, the concept of community performs an analogous denial by presenting the fusion of its members as the ideal." Analysis of two speeches from recent years, that of Maxine Hairston (1985) and Lee Odell (1986) show in more detail how community is used in constructions of composition studies. (TB)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 388 975

Penn State Conference on Rhetoric and Composition July 12-15, 1995

Katherine K. Grubbs
University of California - San Diego
7675 Palmilla Drive #6408
San Diego, CA 92122

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
K Grubbs
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)"

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Title: **Reading Community: Writing Difference**

Every year College Composition and Communication publishes the speech given at the Conference of College Composition and Communication by the program chair of the conference from the previous year. Reading these speeches from the past ten years gives the reader a concrete notion of how the field has been perceived and, in turn, constructed by these leaders in composition. These essays form a unique genre not only because of the status of their authors, but because they represent and consolidate the on-going concern that composition professionals have with their positions in the classroom, in departments of English, in the academy and in the nation. These speeches reach a large audience at the conference and through the journal, and thus, should be read carefully for the ways that they construct not only the field of composition, but also our own subjectivities as teachers of writing.

Emerging partly from the political atmosphere of the 1980s during which composition had to fight for recognition in departments of English, these essays rely largely on a form of identity politics to organize the field. Because in the 80's it seemed necessary to present a "unified front", authors speaking during this time defined the field of composition as a stable identity, framed by specific boundaries which must be maintained in order to hold the field together. However, despite varied stylistic and thematic strategies and, (especially in the 1990s), gestures toward diversity and plurality, I claim that more recent authors of these articles also construct a surprisingly unified and stable identity for the field which is premised on both a liberal humanist subject and a belief in communitarianism. Yet, all of these authors are positing

CS215107

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

unity at some cost - a unity that bleeds out difference in theory, and in practice, in our ranks in the process.

In the face of an increasingly postmodern, and perhaps fragmented, society elsewhere during the 1980s and 1990s, are these essays really based on what is going on in the field? As a composition teacher who is neither a conference chair nor a modernist, this issue is crucial. Lester Faigley takes up this concern in Fragments of Rationality: Postmodernity and the Subject of Composition. In trying to work out the role that composition plays in a postmodern world, he argues that the "lingering modernism in composition studies has a great deal to do with its location in the academy." (206) For any composition professional, then, who is interested in the positionality of composition, it is important to examine closely the theories which form the basis for the descriptions of the field which are provided in these articles. While making a similar connection, I also ask whether these articles provide me with a vision by which I can enter into a conversation with and about the field - or are there other ways to begin to look at the situatedness of composition that could shift thinking away from communitarianism toward strategies that deal more effectively with difference?

Constructing composition as a unified field suppresses difference. It is also premised on the notion that a transparent field is accessible to all, that it will make sense, and will incorporate all like subjects under its umbrella. Iris Young in her text Justice and the Politics of Difference, addresses my concerns about these assumptions when she defines the politics of the "logic of identity" as "an urge to think things together, to reduce them to unity. ...Reason seeks essence, a single formula that classifies concrete particulars as ... something common to all things that belong in the category."(98) Rationality searches for coherence. This logic applies readily to the construction of the particular subjectivities seen in these articles. Young continues, "the logic of identity also seeks to reduce the plurality of particular subjects, their bodily, perspectival experience, to a unity, by measuring them against the unvarying standard of universal reason."(99) Composition professionals (although acknowledged by some of these authors as consisting of diverse individuals) are, as a group, collapsed into the coherence of

communitarianism, of the composition community. This works by "reducing the plurality of subjects to one [over-riding] subjectivity. In its requirement of universality, the ideal of impartial reason is supposed to represent a point of view that any and all rational subjects can adopt, precisely by abstracting from the situational particularities that individualize them."(100-101 Young) Lester Faigley describes the "logic of identity" as an attempt "to merge different things into a single unity. By theorizing underlying principles that unite different things, the logic of identity becomes totalizing. It denies difference by denying the particularity of situations. ...It posits a universal subjectivity that all reasoning people are expected to occupy."(46) Thus, as you will hear as I describe these articles, the authors construct the field of composition in a way that they hope will include all writing teachers.

The unifying concept that both Young and Faigley describe surfaces in these articles embedded in the notion of community. The authors take for granted the assumption that their readers believe in the value of community, and in the particular ways community encompasses diversity. Because these terms are used reasonably and are linked to commonsense ideas, the differences which such terms obscure very easily remain hidden. Difference is lost in the name of pluralism and community. In an effort, throughout the past decade, to move away from notions of individualism and the individual writer, these theorists have instead moved decisively to perpetuate a belief in the power of community. The link that Young and Faigley make is that moving from the relativistic rhetoric of individualism (i.e. everyone has a right to do and believe what they want) to an argument for communities, finally does not represent any progress away from the modernist belief in liberal humanism. The ideal of community is not an adequate response to liberal individualism because the way the two theories construct subjectivities is all too similar.

Thus, the use of community as an organizing function for a united field of composition expresses what Young defines as the "desire for the fusion of subject with one another which in practice operates to exclude those with whom the group does not identify. The ideal of community denies and represses social difference..." (227) Calling on the notion of community

as an alternative to the liberal subject seems to trouble the modernist belief in the stable subject who exists as an unique individual, by invoking "a conception of the person as socially constituted, actively oriented toward affirming relations of mutuality, rather than oriented solely toward satisfying private needs and desires [i.e. as in the humanist subject]" (228) Yet Young argues that this split between individualism and community is not as distinct as it is made out to be, and in fact, with respect to issues of difference, the two share an underlying logic.

> "Each entails a denial of difference and a desire to bring multiplicity and heterogeneity into unity...Liberal individualism denies difference by positing the self as a solid, self-sufficient unity [defined by the individual]...Proponents of community, on the other hand, deny difference by positing fusion rather than separation as the social ideal. They conceive the social subject as a relation of mutuality composed by identification and symmetry among individuals within a totality." (229)

The ideal of community is politically problematic exactly because it tends to suppress differences among its members and exclude those who are labeled as different. "Thus, like the concept of the autonomous subject that denies differences among people by positing an underlying rational unity for every individual, the concept of community performs an analogous denial by presenting the fusion of its members as the ideal."(231 Faigley) Operating under a theory based on the rationality of communitarianism denies the particularity of situations and subjects. This discourse treats all subjects as the same, working in the same community of writing teachers. The authors do not articulate between or among composition professionals. Using "we" in the way that the articles do, presumes a common bond between writing and teaching subjects, neglecting any differences -- whether pedagogical, theoretical or socio-political -- between those teachers that the authors seem to be trying to include. Using a communitarian "we" creates boundaries that exclude all situated as Other. (Faigley 238) Reducing the "plurality of selves and points of view ...to the unity of one rational agent" (Young, 102) ensures that difference will not be addressed despite daily evidence that differences do exist.

At this point I would like to turn to two of the ten articles that I am looking at in this study. Given the time constraints on this paper, I will not have to time to ground the claims I have been making thus far in all ten.

To begin chronologically -- Maxine Hairston in her essay "Breaking Our Bonds and Reaffirming Our Connections", from 1985, responds to perceived conflicts that have emerged at this time between English departments and those who teach composition. She argues against the incorporation of literary theory and literary theorists in writing curricula and classrooms because she feels these links are unnecessary and are evidence of writing professionals toiling to achieve the superficial superiority of literature professionals. Hairston claims that the only reason that composition professors bring in evidence of the post-structuralist work of Derrida, Culler and Fish is to "signal [to literature teachers] that they have not abandoned the faith." (274) Hairston is responding directly to the marginalized position that she feels composition professors take up in English departments; she wants to re-validate composition theorists and writing in the face of the dominance of literary theorists and literature in English departments.

This is an admirable goal, but I would argue that her solution does not address the power dynamics that underlie the uneven relationships, in the intellectual "bonds" she seeks to break. In rhetoric reminiscent of a military "call to arms", Hairston says, "If we are to hold our own against them, the question we must face, the question that will not go away, is 'How can we rally our forces against this intimate enemy?'"(277) In an effort to ignite the passions of her fellow writing teachers to her cause, Hairston erects new exclusionary boundaries that seem to be even stronger.

Hairston wants to strengthen the power of writing teachers because "we are different", and "must pay attention to what our inner selves tell us, find our own values and listen to our own voices -- values and voices that are not against someone else, but for ourselves... we need to listen to our voices when they tell us what is true for us ..." (278) In an effort to separate composition teachers out from the rest of the English department, she has deliberately constructed another community that subsumes any trace of difference that may reside within the

group. The assumption that "we", all writing teachers, have the same values and beliefs - that adjunct and commuter professors have the luxury to articulate feelings that are implicitly shared by tenured professors - seems to bleed out any consideration of difference in an effort to maintain the "ideal of community." Hairston claims that by extricating ourselves from the influence of the literature department, when composition professionals are finally functioning as an autonomous community, "then their power over us will dissolve." (281)

Thus, it should not be a surprise to find that her community is undercut by unexamined hierarchies. The first step Hairston proposes in an effort to shore up the image of composition is that "as individuals we must be productive researchers and scholars who contribute to the growth of our discipline." (279) "we have to publish [and]...set high standards for our research." These parameters of what constitutes a useful member of the composition community does not consider the time constraints and unequal sites of power that graduate students and part-time writing teachers, along with many others, contend with while trying to find locations in which their different subjectivities might be situated. And in fact, Hairston's solution for people who continue to find their department too "hopeless" to work in, and who think that they "...can't wait for that utopian solution, it's not too difficult to find other, more immediate, options. ... [one can] move to another college or university." (281) This, obviously, is not as easy for some faculty members as it might be for others.

The following year, at 4 C's (CCCC) in 1986, Lee Odell speaks in response to the chaos that he feels has overtaken the field of composition as it enters a period of transition and change. Although he does claim that "change is essential to our own intellectual lives and to the life of our discipline," (396) Odell is uneasy at the rapid ways that the "disciplinary ground keeps shifting under our feet." He feels that too often composition teachers are not discriminating enough in their reading of new hypotheses and research about teaching writing. Because of what he sees as an uncritical shifting from one new trend to the next, Odell claims that many now view knowledge in composition as "tentative and subject to revision." (397) This weakens the public perception of composition as a serious field of study. Odell argues that, in order to

validate our new ideas, we need to make more connections both "within the apparently disparate elements of our discipline" and also to look toward "elements of our history that reinforce and enrich our current work." (399) In doing so, Odell hopes to uncover new ways to tie divergent aspects of composition closer together. Instead of chaotic disjunctions and disagreements, we will begin to define our field by focusing on the "significant connections between past and present." (399) By shoring up the weak links that exist currently in composition research, he hopes that the field will present a unified front. This community will encompass any differences that lie within, by refocusing attention onto a "bridge of shared features." Only by establishing grounds for mutual knowledge, values or goals will "we have a chance of persuading, informing, gaining sympathy, entertaining...". (400)

Although in this essay, there is clearly evidence of a recognition of the diversity of opinions, research and pedagogical beliefs that circulate under the title of composition, Odell argues that we must pick out only certain elements as those which will define the field. It is studies connected to the past and to valid quantitative research that will project the most strength. I would argue at this point that Odell needs to be clearer about which elements, which research, whose voices are allowed to be heard? Why does the past seem to be privileged in his argument? Who decides who the representatives of the field will be? Despite the inclusion of a brief discussion of the "trends" that are being followed in composition in the mid 80's, Odell's call for "significant connections" as a way to "help advance learning in our discipline", neatly obscures the potential for exciting new ideas that may be emerging from unrecognized sectors of composition's population. Faigley summarizes Young's observations about this particular concept of community. "As it is popularly conceived, community provides little or no understanding of the politics of existing societies, but rather is the expression of a desire to transcend a present state of alienation." (231) Odell argues that it is this utopic fusion of selected past and present, that will ensure that composition professionals are taken seriously; but one wonders to whose agenda he is addressing this claim. Certainly the research done by

graduate students in 1986 was interesting and challenging, despite the fact that their voices might not have been loud enough to be heard or recognized as serious work under this equation.

Given the scope of this conference paper, I unfortunately do not have time to do justice to the arguments presented in the remaining eight articles. Suffice it to say at this point, that there is evidence in all of these speeches of a reliance on and concern about stable, or stabilizing, boundaries, and that the authors reify, in some way, a kind of pluralistic liberal individualism over a recognition of the richness that may result from an acknowledgment of difference.

My aim in presenting this argument is not to undercut the importance of the particular concerns that each author expresses. It is clear that each author is speaking toward the particular social context for which they are writing. However, it does seem worth noting that even those speeches given in the 1990s, during our current era of various circulating, and competing, theories about composition pedagogies, and the continued fragmentation amid the ranks of composition teachers themselves, continue to privilege certain voices over others, and continue to reify the humanist notions of community and the freedom of the individual. (At this point, I might raise questions about the automatic way that these conference papers are published in 3 C's {CCC}.)As Lester Faigley notes in the introduction to Fragments of Rationality, despite the fact that the field of composition emerged at about the same time that postmodern theory did, it is hard to locate any conversation about composition that reflects a "postmodern view of heterogeneity and difference as liberating forces, ...there are very few calls to celebrate the fragmentary and chaotic currents of change."(14) Postmodern theory, in this sense, challenges the belief that the ideal of community is useful and hopeful for all individuals in the field (such as it is) of composition.

I am arguing here for a way out of composition identity politics. By basing a politics, a "field", on a single, solidifying identity, these authors ignore the differences within, overlooking perhaps their own colleagues. Maybe it is time to move beyond this strategy. Perhaps it is now possible to look at the spectre of unstable boundaries as politically powerful. Relinquishing our reliance on boundaries and community, and thus problematizing the notion of identity politics in

composition, can challenge an essentialized definition of composition and composition teachers. Faigley similarly claims, when looking at student writing, that "ways of theorizing subjectivity are needed that neither hold out for liberal humanism, collapse subjectivity into vague notions of community, nor reject the idea of the subject altogether." (239) This might be the place to being such a project. Perhaps, at this point, it will be useful to point toward Iris Young's "politics of difference." "She looks to postmodern theory because it conceives of the subject as a play of differences that cannot be reduced to a whole."(232 Faigley) An openness to what Young terms "unassimilated otherness" will help construct a politics where differences are preserved and even foregrounded. By giving the power for political representation to diverse social groups, perhaps we can celebrate their "distinctive characteristics and cultures" (240 Young) in a recognition and reaffirmation of current and future potential.